

# ODE TO JOY

Tempus talks to the world's first female master blender about the premium rum that is a true taste of Jamaica

Words: Michelle Johnson



Rum is having a revolution. Often ignored by connoisseurs as the less sophisticated sibling of traditional fine spirits, the popular Caribbean export has much more going for it than a roster of too-sweet oceanside cocktails. Premium aged Jamaican rums, as created at Jamaica's historic Appleton Estate, are now as complex and versatile as the world's finest whiskies – and at the heart of this renaissance is master blender Joy Spence.

"Many consumers still don't think of rum as a premium spirit but it has sophisticated flavours that can – and should – be enjoyed in exactly the same way one would enjoy a fine whisky," Spence says. "Jamaican rum should be rich and complex, with bold, intriguing flavours that excite the palette. That's my definition, and what I make sure we achieve with each new expression."

Raised and educated in Kingston, Spence travelled to England to earn her MSc in Analytical Chemistry, gaining the highest degree scores ever achieved by a University of Loughborough student. Returning to Jamaica, she became a teacher until 1979, when she decided on a career change. Two years later, she became chief chemist of Appleton Estates, the island's oldest sugar estate and distillery in continuous production, dating back to 1749.

"I worked very closely with the previous master blender, Owen

Tulloch, and that's where I discovered the amazing world of rum," she says. "The complex, beautiful flavours of each style of rum, how you create so many different expressions in the blend. It's the perfect combination of chemistry and art. I understudied for Owen until he retired in 1997, which is when I was appointed master blender."

The world's first female master blender in the spirits industry, Spence brought an intensely scientific approach to her craft, combining Appleton's tradition of incorporating both copper pot and column still distillation styles into blends and introducing sophisticated instrumentation, blending formulae and aging processes.

"I'm so proud to have achieved that as a Jamaican woman. I'm not the only female master blender out there anymore, but I'm glad to have been able to break that glass ceiling," she says, though adds the rise of female blenders has been slow across the industry. "It is still male dominated. I have always been embraced and well respected by other master blenders, but when I do motivational talks in high schools and colleges I like to convert students – especially women – into realising there's a whole other world opening up in the rum industry and in sciences."

Such is her impact that Spence has been awarded numerous honorary doctorates and an Order of Distinction

from the Jamaican government. To mark her 20th anniversary as master blender, Appleton Estate renamed its popular rum experience after her and invited her to create a special blend, aptly named 'Joy'.

"I always say that we have a rum for any occasion, but the Appleton Estate Joy Anniversary Blend really is the closest to my heart," she admits. "I was able to indulge my passion and creativity to make a blend I loved. I used my very favourite copper pot still marques – copper pot stills produce very flavourful, aromatic rums with notes of orange peel, spices, and sweeter aromas."

Spence says now her biggest task is educating consumers about the versatility and premium nature of the drink. "The whole perception of rum is finally changing – we have so many more females, as well as men, who are drinking rum – and there's a style to fit any personality profile." As for where to start, she says: "To enjoy neat, I would recommend the Appleton Estate Rare Blend 12 Year Old, and for a nice, elevated cocktail try the Appleton Estate Reserve Blend with brown sugar in a simple daiquiri."

"Of course, if you really want to know the best way to enjoy a glass of rum, you'll need to come right here to the Estate," she laughs. "Then I think you will be hooked for life." ☺

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